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STATE DEPARTMENT

Challenges Facing the Bureau of Diplomatic Security

Statement of Jess T. Ford, Director
International Affairs and Trade



December 9, 2009

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here to discuss the Department of State's (State) Bureau of Diplomatic Security (Diplomatic Security), which is responsible for the protection of people, information, and property at over 400 embassies, consulates, and domestic locations. Since the 1998 bombings of U.S. Embassies in East Africa, the scope and complexity of threats facing Americans abroad and at home has increased. Diplomatic Security must be prepared to counter threats such as crime, espionage, visa and passport fraud, technological intrusions, political violence, and terrorism.

My statement today is based on a GAO report that was issued on November 12, 2009.¹ I will discuss (1) the growth of Diplomatic Security's missions and resources and (2) the challenges Diplomatic Security faces in conducting its work.

To address these objectives in our report, we (1) interviewed numerous officials at Diplomatic Security headquarters, several domestic facilities, and 18 international postings;² (2) analyzed Diplomatic Security and State budget and personnel data; and (3) assessed challenges facing Diplomatic Security through analysis of interviews with personnel positioned domestically and internationally, budget and personnel data provided by State and Diplomatic Security, and planning and strategic documentation. We conducted this performance audit from September 2008 to November 2009, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

¹GAO, *Department of State: Diplomatic Security's Recent Growth Warrants Strategic Review*, [GAO-10-156](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 12, 2009).

²We visited 15 diplomatic posts in nine countries: Egypt (Cairo and Alexandria), Germany (Frankfurt), India (New Delhi and Mumbai), Mexico (Mexico City, Tijuana, and Merida), Tunisia (Tunis), Turkey (Ankara and Istanbul), Saudi Arabia (Riyadh and Jeddah), the Philippines (Manila), and Indonesia (Jakarta). We also conducted video-teleconferences with Diplomatic Security officials in 3 additional posts: Iraq (Baghdad), Afghanistan (Kabul), and Pakistan (Islamabad).

In brief, Mr. Chairman, we found that, since 1998, Diplomatic Security's mission and activities—and, subsequently, its resources—have grown considerably in reaction to a number of security incidents. As a consequence of this growth, we identified several challenges. In particular (1) State is maintaining a presence in an increasing number of dangerous posts, which requires additional resources; (2) staffing shortages in domestic offices and other operational challenges—such as inadequate facilities, language deficiencies, experience gaps, and the difficulty of balancing security needs with State's diplomatic mission—further tax Diplomatic Security's ability to implement all of its missions; and (3) Diplomatic Security's considerable growth has not benefited from adequate strategic guidance. In our report, we recommend that the Secretary of State—as part of the agency's Quadrennial Diplomatic and Development Review (QDDR) or separately—conduct a strategic review of Diplomatic Security to ensure that its missions and activities address its priority needs.

Diplomatic Security's Mission and Resources Have Grown Considerably Since 1998

Because of a number of security incidents, Diplomatic Security's missions and resources have grown tremendously in the past decade. The growth in Diplomatic Security's mission includes key areas such as enhanced physical security and investigations. Following the 1998 attacks on U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, Diplomatic Security determined that more than 85 percent of U.S. diplomatic facilities did not meet its security standards and were therefore vulnerable to terrorist attack; in response, Diplomatic Security added many of the physical security measures currently in place at most U.S. missions worldwide, such as additional barriers, alarms, public address systems, and enhanced access procedures. Since 1998, there have been 39 attacks aimed at U.S. Embassies, Consulates, or Chief of Mission personnel (not including regular attacks against the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad since 2004). The nature of some of these attacks has led Diplomatic Security to further adapt its security measures. Moreover, the attacks of September 11, 2001, underscored the importance of upgrading Diplomatic Security's domestic security programs and enhancing its investigative capacity. Furthermore, following the onset of U.S. operations in Iraq in 2003, Diplomatic Security has had to provide security in the Iraq and Afghanistan war zones and other increasingly hostile environments such as Pakistan.

Diplomatic Security funding and personnel have also increased considerably in conjunction with its expanding missions. Diplomatic Security reports that its budget has increased from about \$200 million in 1998 to \$1.8 billion in 2008. In addition, the size of Diplomatic Security's

direct-hire workforce has doubled since 1998. The number of direct-hire security specialists (special agents, engineers, technicians, and couriers) increased from under 1,000 in 1998 to over 2,000 in 2009, and the number of direct-hire civil service personnel increased from 258 to 592. At the same time, Diplomatic Security has increased its use of contractors to support its security operations worldwide, specifically through increases in the Diplomatic Security guard force and the use of contractors to provide protective details for American diplomats in high-threat environments.

Dangerous Environments, Staffing Shortages, and Reactive Planning Challenge Diplomatic Security

Diplomatic Security faces several policy and operational challenges. First, State is maintaining missions in increasingly dangerous locations, necessitating the use of more resources and making it more difficult to provide security in these locations. Second, although Diplomatic Security has grown considerably in staff over the last 10 years, staffing shortages in domestic offices, as well as other operational challenges further tax Diplomatic Security's ability to implement all of its missions. Finally, State has expanded Diplomatic Security without the benefit of solid strategic planning.

Maintaining Missions in Iraq and Other Increasingly Dangerous Posts Significantly Affects Diplomatic Security's Work

Diplomatic Security officials stated that maintaining missions in dangerous environments such as Iraq and Afghanistan requires more resources and increases the difficulty for Diplomatic Security to provide a secure environment.

Keeping staff secure, yet productive, in Iraq has been one of Diplomatic Security's greatest challenges since 2004, when security for the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad transferred from the U.S. Department of Defense to Diplomatic Security. The U.S. mission in Baghdad—with 1,300 authorized U.S. civilian personnel—is one of the largest in the world. Maintaining Diplomatic Security operations in Iraq has required approximately 36 percent of its entire budget each fiscal year since 2004 and, as of September 2008, required 81 special agents to manage security operations. To support security operations in Iraq, Diplomatic Security has had to draw staff and resources away from other programs. Earlier in 2009, we reported that Diplomatic Security's workload—and thus its resource

requirements—will likely increase as the U.S. military transitions out of Iraq.³

U.S. policymakers' increased focus on Afghanistan poses another significant challenge for Diplomatic Security. The security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated since 2005, and the number of attacks there increased from 2,388 in 2005 to 10,889 in 2008. Afghanistan is Diplomatic Security's second largest overseas post with a staff of 22 special agents in 2009. Diplomatic Security plans to add an additional 25 special agents in 2010, effectively doubling the number of agents in Afghanistan.

In addition to operating in the Iraq and Afghanistan war zones, State is maintaining missions in an increasing number of other dangerous posts—such as Peshawar, Pakistan, and Sana'a, Yemen—some of which State would have previously evacuated.

Diplomatic Security Faces Operational Challenges That Affect Its Ability to Implement Important Activities

Diplomatic Security's ability to fully carry out its mission of providing security worldwide is hindered by staffing shortages in domestic offices and other operational challenges such as inadequate facilities and pervasive language proficiency shortfalls.

Some Diplomatic Security Offices Operate with Severe Staff Shortages

Despite Diplomatic Security's staff growth over the last 10 years, some offices have been operating with severe staffing shortages. In 2008, approximately one-third of Diplomatic Security's domestic suboffices operated with a 25 percent vacancy rate or higher. Several offices report that this shortage of staff affected their ability to conduct their work. For example:

- The Houston field office reported that, for 6 months of the year, it operated at 50 percent capacity of nonsupervisory agents or lower, and for 2 months during the summer, it dipped down to a low of 35 percent. This staffing gap happened while the field office was experiencing a significant increase in its caseload due to the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative.

³GAO, *Iraq: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight*, [GAO-09-294SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 24, 2009).

As a result, the Houston field office management reported that this combination overwhelmed its capabilities and resulted in a significant backlog of cases.⁴

- The New York field office reported that the number of special agents there dropped to 66 in 2008 from more than 110 agents in 2007. As a result, the office had to draw special agents from other field offices to cover its heavy dignitary protection load.
- In 2008, the Mobile Security Deployment (MSD) Office was authorized to have 94 special agent positions, but only 76 were filled. Furthermore, Diplomatic Security officials noted that not all staff in filled positions are available for duty. For example, in 2009, 22 agents assigned to MSD were in training. As a result of the low level of available staff, Diplomatic Security reported that many posts go for years without updating their security training.⁵ Officials noted that this lack of available agents is particularly problematic given the high number of critical threat posts that are only 1-year tours that would benefit from frequent training.

State officials attributed these shortages to the following three factors:

- *Staffing the Iraq mission:* Staffing the Iraq mission in 2008 required 16 percent of Diplomatic Security's staff. In order to provide enough Diplomatic Security special agents in Iraq, we reported that Diplomatic Security had to move agents from other programs, and those moves have affected the agency's ability to perform other missions, including providing security for visiting dignitaries and visa, passport, and identity fraud investigations.⁶
- *Protection details:* Diplomatic Security draws agents from field offices, headquarters, and overseas posts to participate in protective details and special events, such as the Olympics. Recently, Diplomatic Security's role

⁴Houston field office planned to use an increased number of agents scheduled to arrive in early 2009 to address the backlog of cases.

⁵Currently, the MSD Office has two teams posted in Peshawar, Pakistan, and one in Iraq supplementing security. The office must use its four remaining teams to (1) prepare to relieve one of the sitting teams in Peshawar and Baghdad and (2) cover the other parts of its mission.

⁶GAO, *Rebuilding Iraq: DOD and State Department Have Improved Oversight and Coordination of Private Security Contractors in Iraq, but Further Actions Are Needed to Sustain Improvements*. [GAO-08-966](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jul. 31, 2008).

in providing protection at such major events has grown and will require more staff.

- *Normal rotations:* Staff take home leave between postings and sometimes are required to take training before starting their next assignment. This rotation process regularly creates a labor shortage, which affects Diplomatic Security's ability to meet its increased security demands. In 2005, Diplomatic Security identified the need for a training float—additional staff that would allow it to fill critical positions and still allow staff time for job training—but Diplomatic Security has not been able to implement one. This is consistent with our observation that State has been unable to create a training float because its staff increases have been absorbed by the demand for personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Diplomatic Security requested funding to add over 350 security positions in fiscal year 2010. However, new hires cannot be immediately deployed overseas because they must meet training requirements. In addition to hiring new special agents, Diplomatic Security established the Security Protection Specialist (SPS) position in February 2009 to create a cadre of professionals specifically trained in personnel protection who can provide oversight for the contractor-operated protective details in high-threat posts. Because of the more targeted training requirements, Diplomatic Security would be able to deploy the SPS staff more quickly than new hire special agents. However, Diplomatic Security has had difficulty recruiting and hiring a sufficient number of SPS candidates. According to senior Diplomatic Security officials, it may cancel the program if it cannot recruit enough qualified candidates.

Other Operational Challenges Impede Diplomatic Security's Ability to Fully Implement Its Missions and Activities

Diplomatic Security faces a number of other operational challenges that impede it from fully implementing its missions and activities, including:

- *Inadequate buildings:* State is in the process of updating and building many new facilities. However, we have previously identified many posts that do not meet all security standards delineated by the Overseas Security Policy Board and the Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act of 1999.⁷

⁷For GAO's review of the State's Compound Security Upgrade Program, see GAO, *Embassy Security: Upgrades Have Enhanced Security, but Site Conditions Prevent Full Adherence to Standards*, [GAO-08-162](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 18, 2008).

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- *Foreign language deficiencies:* Earlier this year, we found that 53 percent of Regional Security Officers do not speak and read at the level required by their positions, and we concluded that these foreign language shortfalls could be negatively affecting several aspects of U.S. diplomacy, including security operations.⁸ For example, an officer at a post of strategic interest said because she did not speak the language, she had transferred a sensitive telephone call from a local informant to a local employee, which could have compromised the informant's identity.
 - *Experience gaps:* Thirty-four percent of Diplomatic Security's positions (not including those in Baghdad) are filled with officers below the position's grade. For example, several Assistant Regional Security Officers with whom we met were in their first overseas positions and stated that they did not feel adequately prepared for their job, particularly their responsibility to manage large security contracts. We previously reported that experience gaps can compromise diplomatic readiness.⁹
 - *Host country laws:* At times, host country laws prohibit Diplomatic Security from taking all the security precautions it would like outside an embassy. For example, Diplomatic Security officials said that they prefer to arm their local guard forces and their special agents; however, several countries prohibit this. In cases of attack, this prohibition limits Diplomatic Security's ability to protect an embassy or consulate.
 - *Balancing security with the diplomatic mission:* Diplomatic Security's desire to provide the best security possible for State's diplomatic corps has, at times, been in tension with State's diplomatic mission. For example, Diplomatic Security has established strict policies concerning access to U.S. facilities that usually include both personal and vehicle screening. Some public affairs officials—whose job it is to foster relations with host country nationals—have expressed concerns that these security measures discourage visitors from attending U.S. Embassy events or exhibits. In addition, the new embassies and consulates, with their high walls, deep setbacks, and strict screening procedures, have evoked the nickname, "Fortress America."

⁸For GAO's review of language training at State, see GAO, *Department of State: Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls*, [GAO-09-955](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 17, 2009).

⁹For GAO's review on experience gaps at hardship posts, see GAO, *Department of State: Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts*, [GAO-09-874](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 17, 2009).

Although Some Planning Initiatives Have Been Undertaken, Diplomatic Security's Growth Has Been More Reactive Than Strategic

Although some planning initiatives have been undertaken, neither State's departmental strategic plan nor Diplomatic Security's bureau strategic plan specifically addresses its resource needs or its management challenges. Diplomatic Security's tremendous growth over the last 10 years has been reactive and has not benefited from adequate strategic guidance.

State's strategic plan does not specifically address Diplomatic Security's resource needs or management challenges, as required by the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) and other standards.¹⁰ While State's strategic plan for 2007-2012 has a section identifying security priorities and goals, we found it did not identify the resources needed to meet these goals or address all of the management challenges we identified in this report.

Diplomatic Security has undertaken some planning efforts at the bureau and office level, but these efforts also have limitations. First, Diplomatic Security creates an annual bureau strategic plan.¹¹ While this plan lists priorities, goals, and indicators, these elements are not always linked together. Further, the plan does not identify what staff, equipment, or funding would be needed. Second, Diplomatic Security has created a Visa and Passport Security Strategic Plan to guide its efforts to disrupt individuals and organizations that attempt to compromise the integrity of U.S. travel documents. Third, Diplomatic Security reported that it is currently examining all of its security programs to determine how funding and personnel resources are distributed and support its goals. Finally, Diplomatic Security uses established security standards and staffing matrixes to determine what resources are needed for various activities. However, while these various tools help specific offices or missions plan their resource requests, they are not useful for determining overall bureau needs.

¹⁰ GPRA requires that a strategic plan contain six elements. The six elements are: (1) Mission Statement, (2) General (also known as Strategic or Long-Term) Goals and Objectives, (3) Approaches or Strategies to Achieve Goals and Objectives, (4) Relationship between General Goals and Annual Goals, (5) External Factors, and (6) Program Evaluations. The committee report accompanying GPRA also states that a multiyear strategic plan should articulate the fundamental mission of an organization and lay out its long-term general goals for implementing that mission, including the resources needed to reach these goals. GAO has further suggested that addressing management challenges, in addition to other factors, would enhance the usefulness of agencies' strategic plans.

¹¹ Bureau strategic plans were previously called bureau performance plans. State changed the name of these documents in fiscal year 2009.

Several senior Diplomatic Security officials noted that Diplomatic Security remains reactive in nature, stating several reasons for its lack of long-term strategic planning. First, Diplomatic Security provides a support function and must react to the needs of State; therefore, it cannot plan its own resources until State determines overall policy direction. Second, while State has a 5-year workforce plan that addresses all bureaus, officials stated that Diplomatic Security does not use this plan to determine its staffing needs. Finally, past efforts to strategically plan Diplomatic Security resources have gone unheeded. For example, Diplomatic Security's bureau strategic plan for fiscal year 2006 identified a need to (1) develop a workforce strategy to recruit and sustain a diverse and highly skilled security personnel base and (2) establish a training float to address recurring staffing problems. However, as of September 2009, Diplomatic Security had not addressed either of those needs.

Diplomatic Security officials stated they hope to participate in a new State management initiative, the Quadrennial Diplomatic and Development Review (QDDR). This review, which will be managed by a senior leadership team under the direction of the Secretary of State, is designed to provide the short-, medium-, and long-term blueprints for State's diplomatic and development efforts and offer guidance on how State develops policies, allocates its resources, deploys its staff, and exercises its authorities.

Recommendations for Executive Action

In our report, we recommended that the Secretary of State—as part of the QDDR or as a separate initiative—conduct a strategic review of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security to ensure that its missions and activities address State's priority needs. This review should also address key human capital and operational challenges faced by Diplomatic Security, such as

- operating domestic and international activities with adequate staff;
- providing security for facilities that do not meet all security standards;
- staffing foreign missions with officials who have appropriate language skills;
- operating programs with experienced staff, at the commensurate grade levels; and
- balancing security needs with State's need to conduct its diplomatic mission.

State agreed with our recommendation and noted that, although it is currently not planning to perform a strategic review of the full Diplomatic Security mission and capabilities in the QDDR, the Under Secretary for Management and the Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security are completely committed to ensuring that Diplomatic Security's mission will benefit from this initiative.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have at this time.

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

For questions regarding this testimony, please contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov. Individuals making key contributions to this testimony include Anthony Moran, Assistant Director; Miriam Carroll Fenton; Joseph Carney; Jonathan Fremont; and Antoine Clark.

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